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PRUDEN ON POLITICS

By

Wesley Pruden



The moral drawn in Manila's streets

Teddy Kennedy is no less delighted than any of the rest of us about the fairy tale come true in the Philippines.

For once, liberal and conservative, left and right agree: The good gal won.

But, in the mellow satisfaction of the moment, the senator underlined, for all to see, how the liberals — decent good guys themselves, in the main — inevitably undermine their own good intentions. They often risk holding the security of their country hostage to these good intentions.

"In recent days," Mr. Kennedy said yesterday, "the Philippine people have demonstrated again the power of the idea of democracy."

That sounds delicious and right. Alas, it's not true. A vigilant democracy has power. But "the idea of democracy" is small-caliber stuff, however bravely it is arrayed against an angry armed force ready to crush it, until it arms itself with something more than good intentions.

Corazon Aquino would have been crushed, probably in the way that her husband was crushed, if the forces of Ferdinand Marcos had been loosed against her. The Philippine people who rushed into the streets to defend her exerted power that became a threat to the regime only when the people made it clear they were willing to die in the streets — as a few of them did — to throw out the tyrant.

If Juan Ponce Enrile, the defense minister, and Fidel Ramos, then the deputy chief of the armed forces, had not themselves joined the uprising — and, most important, taken 85 percent of the armed forces with them — can anyone doubt that Ferdinand Marcos would still be dining on lobster for breakfast (or whatever else he wanted) at Malacanang Palace?

Some sweet old softies nevertheless imagine that the way to fight dictators and despots is with short sermons and a little soda water. Show the peasants how to use a toothbrush and the Marxists will throw down their AK-47 assault rifles.

Nobody in Washington, except for Tip O'Neill and the ghost of his Aunt Eunice, any longer believes, for example, that the Sandinistas are anything but relentlessly brutal Marxists who are determined to stamp out every trace of the "pluralism" they paid such praise to when they were trying (with U.S. help) to topple the Somoza regime.

But there are still a lot of people in the Congress who think unarmed nice guys can be a match for the Sandinistas and their powerful Soviet weapons. David Durenberger, the Republican senator from Minnesota, is one of them. He's against "lethal aid" for the Nicaraguan resistance. The idea of fighting makes him feel faint. See what a good fellow he is?

Just as the priests and opposition editors and politicians-in-hiding fear the Sandinistas, so Mr. Durenberger fears letting Mr. Reagan do anything about it. He promises to make sure that Congress ties the president's hands.

"I think we've got the votes," he says.

Mr. Durenberger is willing, as he was last year, to send doughnuts and Band-Aids to Nicaragua. The president says he needs more to "make possible" a "peaceful resolution" of the conflict between the Nicaraguan people and the Marxist government. That's the mush the president serves to the toothless Mr. Durenberger and his like-minded friends in the Congress, because he's afraid fainting spells would break out all over the Hill if he said what he really means — that the Nicaraguans deserve a chance to do for themselves what the Filipinos did for themselves.

Cory Aquino is a better man than many of the American politicians now falling all over themselves to get themselves quoted as praising her. Her followers, the men and women who put themselves in front of the Marcos tanks, demanded something stronger than cornmeal and water.

They understood, as their faint-hearted admirers in the Congress do not, that force and power is the only currency that settles debts. The despot lay at the mercy of the power of the people only after he was stripped of his armed forces.

Force, as usual, settled everything.